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"This Doll's House Will Fall:" An Exploration of Nineteenth Century Society and its Impact on the Individual

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Abstract

This essay examines Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* as two works of fiction that illustrate the negative impact of European nineteenth century middle class society on individual lives in that community. The issue to be investigated is how persons elected to escape these forces. I present this social structure's characteristic features, such as feverish ambition, obtainment of wealth, and oppression of women's rights, and explore their manifestations in the literary efforts of Tolstoy and Ibsen. Scholarly research articles, government studies, and economic trends from nineteenth century Europe are considered in the analysis. Because both depict central characters who must ultimately choose between the life contemporary social climate has dictated and the more solitary road to spiritual freedom, this essay argues that the two works declare that internal peace and adherence to the bourgeoisie class of the time period are mutually exclusive states of existence.

Key Terms:

- Bourgeoisie
- Individuality
- Marriage
- Norway
- Russia
- Transformation

Authors have long made pervasive social problems and encouragement for reform the raw material for their literary expression. As they explore an issue's structure and conditions, these writers often condemn its overwhelmingly negative consequences on the lives of individuals who adhere, whether by choice or unconscious tradition, to its regulations. In this essay, I explore how the mid-nineteenth century bourgeoisie classes of Russia and Norway both worked to minimize individualistic thought and action in order to maintain social relations at their equilibrium. These standards manifested themselves through specific social pressures and core institutions. Russian author Leo Tolstoy and Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen criticize such practices in their own country's middle class social community in *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and *A Doll's House*, respectively. To illustrate the breadth of social destruction in the lives of individuals, both Tolstoy and Ibsen create characters who, throughout the course of the plot, expose the devastating external forces that have framed the current unraveling of their situations. Though seemingly different in theme, plot content, and characterization, I will demonstrate that foundational elements of both works serve to unify them by depicting characters who must overcome their socially induced conflicts, and ultimately the middle-class community itself. Consequently, these fictional persons must transform their internal selves against the constructs of such a society that has so detrimentally affected their physical and mental well-being.

This conjoined analysis of *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and *A Doll's House* is useful and original because the two works have not previously been researched cooperatively within the scope of the powerful European social structure of the time period. Published in 1886, *The Death of Ivan Ilych* is a short story that chronicles the last months of Ivan Ilych, a high

ranking judge in the Russian courts who has tirelessly spent his life seeking the approval and favor of others. For this reason, he forges a judicial career to satiate his ambition, chooses to marry a socially-elevated woman he does not love, and befriends colleagues who are just as ruthlessly driven as he. When Ivan injures himself in what seems to be a minor accident, he is finally forced to examine the life choices he has made, as his slow death provides him the clarity to truly see the faults within himself and those around him. In contrast, *A Doll's House* depicts the transformation of a woman who has been tethered to either her father or her husband throughout her life. Initially, Nora Helmer is quite content in personifying the sociable housewife archetype as she obeys her husband Torvald unquestioningly and allows him to treat her as a possession. Unbeknownst to Torvald, Nora forged her signature to borrow money from the social outcast Nigel Krogstad to get her deathly ill husband sent to Italy for life-saving treatment at some time chronologically before the play. Nora has been quietly paying her debt to the seedy Krogstad ever since. The plot unfolds as her secrets are threatened to be revealed, and social conventions of womanhood and marriage are challenged. Nora, like Ivan Ilych, must confront the reality of her subordinate situation, and she ultimately decides to leave her husband and children to understand her unadulterated self without the rigorous regulations of patriarchy. Though they differ in literary logistics, the two works share a common conflict that is open for interpretation and analysis.

As famed Russian writer and social activist Leo Tolstoy often did with his later works, *The Death of Ivan Ilych* depicts the fundamental wrong middle-class society has committed against its members, prioritizing ambitions, institutions, and conventions approved by the masses over distinctiveness and morality of individual character. A member of Russian aristocracy and a cultural juggernaut, Tolstoy publicly renounced

the confining conventions that both the noble and bourgeois classes dictated. In the non-fictional, autobiographical *A Confession*, Tolstoy extensively describes his own negative experiences with Russian social structure, believing the external pressure he feels to be ambitious "a falsity which has become obvious to me and stared me in the face" (*A Confession* 5). Furthermore, the author contrasts the stifled members of the bourgeoisie to his peasant students who possess "a spirit of perfect freedom...choosing what path of progress they please" (*A Confession* 5). As a result, Tolstoy retreated from active social life and championed the virtues of forgiveness, honesty, and chastity in interpersonal relationships. Much of his ensuing literary effort was concerned with conflicting the central character's needs and society's desires. With the healthy Ivan Ilych being one such personification, Tolstoy effectively makes the point that commitment to social constraints makes one detached from life's realest emotions and most unbending realities, such as the universal inevitability of disease and death.

In his description of the well-placed judge and public official, Tolstoy portrays his main character as being so extremely bound to social approval that its presence completely dictates the course of his life, writing that not only was Ivan Ilych "strict in the fulfillment of...his duty to be what was so considered by those in authority", but he also was "by nature attracted to people of high station...assimilating [into] their ways and views of life" (*Ivan Ilych* 996). The judge is described in detail as having performed no acts of his own accord; rather he only does so in the context of what is seen by society, and therefore what "his instinct unfailingly indicated to him", as correct (*Ivan Ilych* 996). This includes Ivan Ilych's decision to marry the "well-connected...pretty, and thoroughly correct" Praskovya Fedorovna, whose union to the public figure "gave him personal satisfaction and...was considered the right thing by the most highly placed of his

associates" (*Ivan Ilych* 998). Through the trials that marriage inescapably brings, however, Ilych's lack of honest feeling for his wife only serves to make him resent their bond. As the years pass and disagreement becomes common, Ivan Ilych "transferred the center of gravity of his life more and more to his official work" (*Ivan Ilych* 999). In writing that the judge "lived for seventeen years after his marriage," Tolstoy suggests that the character's metaphorical removal from his faulty marriage, an institution built to reinforce human interaction and emotions, definitively caused his detachment from a true self and a consequent early spiritual death (*Ivan Ilych* 1000). His physical end, too, is brought about by his unwillingness to exist outside of community correctness.

Ivan Ilych's minor accident turned fatal injury is itself a direct result of his vanity, as he falls and hits his side against a knob of a window frame while hanging drapes in his home. The house, newly bought and meticulously self-furnished, is Ivan Ilych's personal ode to his beloved social laws that extend themselves to mandate where a highly placed professional ought to live and what that residence ought to look like. As the pain and illness progress, Ivan Ilych soon realizes that he alone has concern for his suffering. Tolstoy elaborates, "Those about him did not understand, or would not understand [his condition], but thought everything in the world was going on as usual" (*Ivan Ilych* 1008). He continues to experience the loneliness and choking fear embedded in the unrelenting pain solely of his own sowing as his wife, children, and colleagues take his state as a matter of annoyance, possible professional opportunity, and finally uncomfortable pity. Upon realization that the injury will kill the judge, Tolstoy writes that "anger choked [Ilych] and he was agonizingly, unbearably miserable" (*Ivan Ilych* 1012). When in contact with all but his kind but poor servant Gerasim, Ivan Ilych feels disgust with the denial that has ruled his life and continues to order theirs. When speaking with his wife Praskovya

Fedorovna, for example, Ilych is asserted to “hate her from the bottom of his soul” (*Ivan Ilych* 1013). As he struggles to accept his death, Ivan Ilych finally understands his great error of “correct living”, in that he formerly did so without a concept of reality. He laments, “What tormented [him] most was the deception, the lie, which for some reason they all accepted” (*Ivan Ilych* 1016). He comes to acknowledge his transgressions in the absence of genuine affection by all but Geraism, whose “attitude towards him ... was akin to something [Ilych wished to be]” (*Ivan Ilych* 1017). In his essay “Tolstoy, Death and the Meaning of Life,” literary critic Roy W. Perrett writes of Ivan’s deathbed resolve: “In the face of death [Ivan Ilych] comes to know that the way he has lived is wrong, for his death renders meaningless the life he has led by destroying that to which he is so attached, power and control” (241-242). He now reproachfully addresses his wife, children, doctor, and friends, feeling that their “falsity...did more than anything else to poison his last days” (*Ivan Ilych* 1017). By expressing abhorrence toward his former philosophy, Ivan Ilych is effectively transformed to exist outside of social constraints in his last lingering days, as he quietly comments to himself, “in place of death there was light” (*Ivan Ilych* 1018). Thus, this newfound peace allots Ivan Ilych the freedom to accept the forces in his life that transcend human control.

In contrast to the high drama and extreme characterization of *The Death of Ivan Ilych*’s plot, Henrik Ibsen constructs his play *A Doll’s House* to have everyday situations as the main events that comprise the story of Nora and Torvald Helmer. In the grossly distorted but realistically common nature of their marriage, these two complex characters are utilized by Ibsen to illustrate the suffocating product of structuring one’s life and personal philosophy inside a social framework that dictates strict male dominance. Female inability to exist as separate from and equal to a man, particularly one’s husband, was the widely-held convention of Ibsen’s transnational audience.

Literary analyst Joan Templeton asserts the importance of the thematic elements in the play: “The conflict between love and law, between heart and head, between feminine and masculine, is the moral center of *A Doll’s House*” (35). First performed in 1879, *A Doll’s House* contains specific elements of Norwegian culture central to the time period. Norway underwent major reforms concerning gender relations in the mid-nineteenth century, including women being given the right to own property in 1853 and the removal of unmarried women from minor status in 1863. As a result of prosperous business ventures domestically and abroad in agriculture, engineering, and technology, Norway saw “a period of significant economic growth up to the mid 1870s” (Grytten). Norwegian middle-class wealth rose exponentially from 1843 to 1876 with an annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita growth rate of 1.6 percent; their belief system, however, was static and not unlike other strongly patriarchal European countries of the period (Grytten). In the government study “Women’s Role in Cultural Life in Norway,” conducted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization’s Norwegian National Commission, the influx of trade benefits marked “a significant change in women’s lives ... [because] money assumes a more important role in the trade of goods and housekeeping, becoming more privatized” (7). Therefore, the socioeconomic study states, “Women’s responsibility now becomes limited to the nuclear family and its private matters” (7). It is in this climate that Ibsen pens *A Doll’s House*, and realistically depicts a stringent social stratum that sought, despite relatively recent political efforts, to marginalize women in the overall prosperity of mid-nineteenth century Norway.

Though throughout the play Nora and Torvald Helmer are affectionate and generally kind to one another, the root of their relationship is clearly superior to subordinate, in accordance with the social norms of patriarchal nineteenth century

Europe. Torvald often tellingly refers to his wife as a high-energy, not particularly intelligent animal or a wanting child with whom serious conversation cannot be made. In the opening of Act 1, Helmer gives Nora money for Christmas shopping and they playfully banter over her spending. He presents the money like a prize for a child, "Come, come; my little lark mustn't droop her wings like that...Nora, what do I think I have here?" (Ibsen 1, 1066). Upon receiving the money, Nora happily thanks him and continues to look for his indulgence and approval in her thrift-shopping, to which he gives but also laments, "It's a sweet little lark, but it get through a lot of money. No one would believe how much it costs a man to keep such a little bird as you" (Ibsen 1, 1067). He then proceeds to make sure she has not broken his rule of abstaining from candy, which she has, but fervently insists the contrary, saying, "I shouldn't think of doing what you disapprove of" (Ibsen 1, 1068). This initial interaction, though decidedly ordinary and unexciting, provides tangible and crucial evidence to the vastly unequal union of Nora and Torvald. The commonplace nature of the conversation displays the calm correctness of their marriage within patriarchal, bourgeoisie society, as it is perfectly agreeable to both wife and husband to think and behave in such a manner. At this early point in the play for Nora Helmer, her inferior station in legal, economic, and domestic matters is an unquestioned state shared by all unwidowed women. Therefore, she is to adopt the principles, rules, and beliefs of her legal guardian, whether he be her father or her husband. Indeed, she does so in giddy fashion. On Nora's attitude, Templeton states, "[Nora] embodies the comedy as well as the tragedy of modern life" thereby solidifying her complexity as an individual oppressed, yet blind to her circumstances (28). Nevertheless, Nora has been treated as having less intellectual capacities than a man by both of the instrumental figures in her life, her deceased father and Torvald. She does not feel bound to Torvald by social duty alone, however. She feels that they love each other and does not believe their situation

is unequal; rather, their roles are simply a matter of culture and formality. A few years prior to the time of the play, Nora covertly borrows a large amount of money to save then sick Torvald's life, a natural manifestation of her love and dedication. As the plot progresses and her secret is threatened to be revealed, and then does become known to her husband in the final act, Nora's level of commitment to the corrupt institution dramatically shifts.

While she spends the majority of the play devising various plans and schemes to prevent Helmer from learning of her debit and forgery, Nora unbendingly believes that if her husband were to know, he would sacrifice himself and his elevating banking career for her, but it is a situation she adamantly does not want to put him in. His reaction to the truth, in the form of Krogstad's letter, however, is severe anger and disgust with her dishonesty, despite her purpose of benefiting him, wildly lamenting, "Oh, the unfathomable hideousness of it all! Ugh! Ugh!" (Ibsen 3, 1109). He makes immediate plans to cover up the imminent scandal and remove their children from her care while he and Nora continue living as a happily married couple to adhere to the prevailing social conventions. He hurls insults at his wife while hunting for a solution, "You have ruined my future...[but] we must make no outward change in our way of life...you will continue to live here...[but] I dare not trust [the children] to you" (Ibsen 3, 1110). In this theatrical, unexpected conclusion to Nora's troubles, she is forced to realize that her husband cares more about his professional advancement and the approval of others than he ever could for her well-being. She understands this in the midst of Torvald's rage, as she goes from pleading with him "not to take [her] guilt upon[him]self" to responding laconically to his feverish accusations and invectives, only drily promising that "When I am out of the world, you will be free" (Ibsen 3, 1109-1110). Once Krogstad sends another letter withdrawing his threat, Torvald immediately

retracts his statements as well, and cries in a passion, "Nora, I am saved! ... the whole thing shall be nothing but a dream to me ... it's over, all over!" (Ibsen 3, 1110-1111). However, Helmer's reaction only moments before has inadvertently exposed his true character to Nora as one of selfishness and robotic conformity, and she immediately decides to leave him and their children. In the first serious conversation of their marriage, Nora asserts her new but firm stance that her "life has come to nothing" because she has always been treated "as a doll-child" and never thought to hold any opinions or tastes of her own (Ibsen 3, 1112). She goes on to calmly explain that her former idea of her husband was incorrect, saying "You were not the man I had imagined ... you only thought it amusing to be in love with me" (Ibsen 1112,1114). The most central aspect of her transformation, however, comes with her detailed refutation of the gender and marital conventions that she blindly obeyed as she elaborates on future plans. When Helmer suggests that Nora has never been alone and complains about "what the world will say", she responds that she "must try to gain experience" and that she "can pay no heed to [the opinion of others]" (Ibsen 3, 1113). Nora then counters his "duties to [Torvald] and [their] children" rebuttal by saying, "I have ... equally sacred duties ... towards myself ... I believe that before all else I am a human being" (Ibsen 3, 1113). In this way, Nora Helmer defines her existence separate from the man she is socially accepted to be less than, and therefore to whom she is subordinately confined. Ibsen ends *A Doll's House* with Nora Helmer walking out of her home with Torvald and into a world of personal development, unrestrained by social constructs and the rigid institutions that they produce.

While Tolstoy used the short story of *The Death of Ivan Ilych* to depict the overarching moral transgressions of society, Ibsen chose the social institution of marriage to portray the very same evils of nineteenth century European social

standards. The plots and characters created to convey these points, too, are different; Nora and Torvald Helmer move through an ordinary and commonplace situation to expose the hardened sexist conventionality of Torvald and society at large. Ivan Ilych, however, is shown in the most dramatic stage of life before he realizes the error of his conforming ways. Despite their contrasting method of delivery, Tolstoy and Ibsen both paint the same picture of European society which serves to smother genuine human connections and opportunities for personal growth alike. Indeed, both authors asserted and illustrated that these treasures could only be explored in a realm unyielding to influences of the masses.

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